

The multifaceted representations of Salome on the silver screen: between and beyond the Apollonian and the Dionysian?

Magali Perrault

Module: Stories, History and Ticket Sales: Greeks and Romans on the Silver screen (CLCS 7001)

Word count: 5,019 words

“Salomé, what a woman, what a part. The princess in love with a holy man” (Norma Desmond about the role of Salomé, in *Sunset Boulevard*, 1950)

The Herodian princess Salome has been a favourite of artists across the ages and cultural historians, literature scholars or musicologists have extensively studied her pictorial, literary or musical representations. Although much less often explored, her myth has also attracted and inspired the silver screen, even if her film portrayals have often been cursorily dismissed as uninspiring¹. In contrast and against this view, this essays purports to show how Salome’s cinema appearances can on their own in fact constitute an interesting case study in classical reception.

When investigating Salome, an important caveat immediately needs to be addressed. The sources regarding the historical figure are limited to cursory anecdotal allusions in the New Testament (the Gospels of Mark 6:14–29 and Matthew 14:1–12) and in Josephus, who gives her a name and a genealogy (*Antiquitates Iudaicae*, XVIII, 5: 4). Salome is “hardly more than a mirage”² and her portrayal in cinema almost necessarily and unavoidably intertextual, often connected with her two most influential modern incarnations: Wilde’s 1893 play and Strauss’ 1905 opera. One of the only articles specifically devoted to Salome in film hence identifies three types of “Salome”-movies³: firstly, those (very loosely) based on biblical or historiographical sources (for instance, 1918 Gordon

¹ Neginsky, 2013, p.3

² Claudel, 2013, p.11

³ Kühnel, 2013, p.159

Edwards' film with Theda Bara and 1953 William Dieterle's with Rita Hayworth); secondly, those based on Wilde's play (the 1923 silent movie with Alla Nazimova and Ken Russell's 1988 *Salome's Last Dance*) to which one could add Carmelo Bene's *Salome* (1972), Carlos Saura's 2002 flamenco version and Al Pacino's *Wilde Salome* (2011); thirdly, the filmed version of Strauss' opera (Götz 1974). To this typology could be added two additional categories: Salome's short but significant appearances in "Jesus films"⁴ such as *King of Kings* (Ray, 1961), *The Greatest Story ever Told* (Stevens, 1965) or *Jesus of Nazareth* (Zeffirelli, 1977); her reinvention in Pedro Almodovar's short film (1978) as well as her intertextual role in *Salome Where She Danced* (Lamont 1945) and *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder 1950), where the former silent cinema star Norma Desmond dreams to revive her former glory by playing the role of the princess "in love with a holy man".

Beyond this typology and using those movies as evidence, this essay will adopt Nietzsche's definition of the Apollonian and Dionysian in the *Birth of Tragedy* and contend that studying Salome's representations under this lens can help to "see" and redefine her as a figure of Greek tragedy. This return to "mythology" and to Antiquity will consequently and relatedly aim to show how the films' Salomes can provide valuable and interdisciplinary insights on the ancient as well as modern worlds.

Nietzsche defined the Apollonian in Greek tragedy as « the art of the creator of images » or « the realm of dream »⁵ and many of Salome's screen appearances seem to fit this definition. In Dieterle's film, Rita Hayworth thus personifies an idealistic, dreamy and innocent Salome, who dances to save John the Baptist's life and is redeemed by her conversion to Christianity. In this version, the princess is a graceful dancer, in the tradition of Flaubert's short story *Hérodias*, Massenet's opera *Hérodiade* and the early twentieth-century dance shows of Loie Fuller or Maud Allan⁶. The princess is a young

⁴ Nguyen, 2010, p.184

⁵ Nietzsche, 2013, p.79 (1872)

⁶ Dierkes-Thrun, 2011, p.1889

girl or woman, the “*korasion*” described in the sources⁷, manipulated by her mother. Like Fuller, Hayworth is a “whitened” Salome, “not the dark-haired passionate creature the medieval painters have made her, but a radiant blonde [or red-hair, in Hayworth’s case], scarcely more than a child, an instrument adroitly used by a wicked mother”⁸. Dieterle’s movie has (perhaps for this reason?) been summarily dismissed as a failure, described by a reviewer as a «Biblical-erotic fresco swamped in fake marble...and kitsch excesses”⁹. Yet, even if it arguably contrasts with the “high-art” Salomes of the beginning of the twentieth century¹⁰, the film remains a product of the Hollywood of those times and in fact shares much with the (more critically acclaimed and better known) *The Robe* (1953) and *Ben Hur* (1959). It is a conversion story: the movie finishes with Salome attending the sermon on the mountain and the face of Jesus, as in the two other movies, never appears on screen. Rome is similarly represented as a dictatorial and evil power: “I hate the Romans”, claims Hayworth’s Salome before falling in love with a “good”, Christian, one. Dieterle is not an obviously apolitical director (German-born and Jewish, he was the assistant of Max Reinhardt at the Berlin Deutsches Theater, immigrated to the United States and directed in 1937 a *Life of Zola* focused on the writer’s fight against antisemitism during the Dreyfus affair) but, in the context of the Hays Code, the “vamp” Rita Hayworth becomes “a good American citizen”, virtually the exact opposite of the femme fatale she previously personified in *Gilda* (1946) and *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948)¹¹.

Salome receives a similar Apollonian treatment when she appears as an exotic guest star in “Jesus films”. *King of Kings* devotes 8 minutes to Salome’s dance, providing the audience with an “erotic” interlude testing the limits of the Hays code¹² but Salome remains extremely chaste, does not take off her veils and the spectator is not informed as to her motivations: is she asking for John the Baptist’s head to comply with her wicked mother’s orders or out of sheer personal perversion?. The

⁷ Claudel, 2013, p.37

⁸ Garelick, 2007, p.95

⁹ Tulard, 2002, p.2635

¹⁰ Rowden, 2016, p.4

¹¹ Saxton, 1996, p.29; Kühnel, 2013, p.161

¹² Eschrich, 2011, p.527

same applies to Salome in *The Greatest Story ever Told* or *Jesus of Nazareth*, which both tend to downplay the character's wickedness. In those "Biblical" movies, the princess largely appears as a mild erotic and "romantic" after-thought. Like the Medea who dances in the temple in *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), she is objectified for her body, conceivably just another example of "the marginalisation of women in filmic recreations of... Antiquity"¹³.

This Apollonian representation of Salome is finally reflected in movies where the Biblical Salome features intertextually, such as in the western *Salome where she danced*, where "Salome" seduces the head of a band of robbers and uses her charms to convince him to give back to the town people what he has stolen from them. Salome then becomes not only a convert (to human and Christian love) but also the "one who converts" through her dance and her body. This Apollonian *metamorphosis* is perhaps even more explicit in Almodovar's short movie. The Spanish director completely recontextualises and reinvents Salome as a divine tool. She appears to the (Biblical) prophet Abraham, dances with her veils and convinces him to sacrifice his son Isaac before vanishing, replaced by the voice of God himself, who tells Abraham (predictably) that the sacrifice he is getting ready to accomplish was simply a test of his faith. More unpredictably though, God proceeds to inform Abraham (and the audience) that "Salome is merely one of the numerous shapes [he] uses to appear to men" and instructs him to tell women to wear from now on a veil to cover their heads when praying.

Even in those Apollonian guises, Salome however remains an ambivalent figure and cinema also portrayed her as a Dionysian character. Like the Salomes of Wilde and Strauss, those princesses are "deaf to the Apollonian lyre" and have "no interest in religious miracles"¹⁴. They relate to a world

¹³ Nikoloutsos, 2013, p.19

¹⁴ Gilliam, 2010, p.276

dominated by perversion and orgiastic violence and are in most cases ultimately only redeemed by death.

Like several early short movies from 1908 or 1909¹⁵, the Salome of one of the original cinema “vamps” Theda Bara is now lost but, according to contemporary reviews, she was portrayed as a vicious and unrequited seductress, who, even before her encounter with John, was already guilty of a murder and a poisoning attempt¹⁶. Nazimova’s 1923 incarnation, in the era of the silent cinema and pre-Hays Code Hollywood, further testifies to those Dionysian aspects. Despite the static nature of her dance, Nazimova’s Salome is based on Wilde and applies to the screen “the conventions of the nineteenth century lyrical stage”¹⁷: most notable in this respect are the decors and the art nouveau costumes designed by Natacha Rambova, directly inspired by Audrey Beardsley’s illustrations of Wilde’s play¹⁸. Nazimova incarnates a desiring woman rather than a young innocent girl: she was already 42 year-old at the time of the film, arguably in line with Wilde’s ideas for Salome, whose theatrical role he originally intended for the 49 year-old Sarah Bernhardt¹⁹. In this Dionysian likeness, Salome suffers from and is the victim of what ancient Greeks called *himeros*, unrequited *eros*, as well as of her *hubris*.

Beyond this dichotomy, I will however argue that cinematic Salomes are perhaps most accurately studied as reconciliations of the Apollonian and the Dionysian realms, the dialectical process which in fact constituted for Nietzsche the essence of ancient Greek tragedy²⁰. This could be a recipe for box-office success (if one adopts Altman’s concept of “crossroad experiences”²¹) but, in this case,

¹⁵ Dierkes-Thrun, 2011, p.2053

¹⁶ Dierkes-Thrun, 2011, p.3072

¹⁷ Saxton, 1996, p.28

¹⁸ Fischer, 2017, p.83

¹⁹ Claudel, 2013, p.157

²⁰ Nietzsche 2013, p.89 (1872)

²¹ Altman, 1999, p.145

often in practice becomes a problem as many of Salome's portrayals often uncomfortably and unsatisfactorily hesitate between Pidduck's definitions of the epic and the intimate costume films²².

Despite this, approaching and "seeing" Salome as a Greek tragedy and a Greek myth appears to constitute a valid approach, vindicated by the biography of Wilde, the author of the play that constitutes the reference point for many Salomé movies. The Irish writer's classical education and his admiration for Greek tragedy are well documented²³ and many references to ancient theatre and mythology inform both his play and the subsequent (related or not) portrayals of the Judean princess in cinema. This "tragic" Salome, whether she survives a Christian or dies a sinner, experiences a *katharsis*, in its Aristotelean meaning of "cleansing", "purification" or "purgation"²⁴. Like the characters of Greek tragedy discussed in Aristotle's *Poetics*, she also experiences a *metabasis* and evokes "pity and fear"²⁵. Her transformation is materialised by striking changes of dresses (off screen for Nazimova, on screen for Saura's Salome, the flamenco dancer Aida Gomez, who finishes like Rita Hayworth in a white dress) or hair style (first hidden under a headdress and then loosened, for Friedrich). Salome often performs a "classical" *katabasis*²⁶, for instance when Hayworth goes underground to meet and be converted by John in Dieterle's film. Possibly because of the technical and financial possibilities of cinema as a medium compared to theatre or opera, many Salome's movies in addition attach significant importance to the role of the "crowd", which almost behaves as a Greek chorus. This is for instance the case in Friedrich's filming of Strauss's opera, in Bene's movie (when several characters repeat the same thing as in an echo) or in Saura's dance version where Salome and the other principals are accompanied by a sizeable troupe.

Many symbols featuring in Salome movies are also explicitly connected to Greek and ancient *topoi*.

The moon plays a paramount role in many films, changing colours or shapes as the action progresses

²² Pidduck, 2004, p.5

²³ Schiffer, 2009, p.49; Ross, 2013

²⁴ Halliwell, 1995, p.17

²⁵ Aristot. *Poet.* 52a3–4, 52a36–b3; Halliwell, 1995, p.15

²⁶ Holtsmark, 2001.

(in Nazimova, Bene or Saura) and often representing a recurring subject of discussion (Russell's Salome thus ascertains that "[the moon] is "a virgin"). This is of course following Wilde's version but also relates to the antique vision of the moon, which was for the Greeks a symbol of youth, beauty and virginity. Like Diana, the "lunar deity of the night" and "wild huntress", the princess is dangerous to look at²⁷ and her name itself sounds phonetically (even if coincidentally) close to Selene²⁸. The peacock, for instance in Nazimova and Friedrich, is similarly of course Wildean, an Art Nouveau symbol and the "preferred guise of the vamp...associated with the East"²⁹ but it is also an ancient attribute of king Salomon and Hera³⁰. As a tragic figure and a myth, the cinematic Salome seemingly belongs to the family of Medea. She is the Other, the woman and the foreigner, who, for instance in Bene's version, speaks (little) in a very slow Italian, while the Baptist and other characters appear to be using a fluid Sicilian dialect. Like Pasolini's Medea, the "Other"³¹ putting on a "Greek" gown, Salome's dresses and hair styles reflect her increasing alienation as the tragedy unfolds.

Most significant perhaps to a discussion of Salome as a tragic figure is however the nature of her "guilt". For Friedrich or Saura, and unlike Dieterle's "innocent" purely Apollonian princess, Salome is a femme fatale but her "amorous passion" (the words used by Saura himself in the film's making of)³² exculpates her. In accordance with Aristotelean canons, she suffers not "through evil and depravity but through some kind of error" (*harmatia*)³³. This tragic connection is perhaps most explicitly unveiled by Saura, in a flash-back where John the Baptist shows and "reveals" to Salome the (traditionally unseen) founding crime behind the tragedy, the murder of her father Philip by her mother Herodias and Herod Antipas.

²⁷ Vincent, 2011, p.16

²⁸ Cardin, 1996, p.91

²⁹ Fischer, 2017, p.93

³⁰ Pasquier, 2018, p.145

³¹ Ryan, 1999, p.194; Syrimis, 2012, p.514

³² Saura 2002

³³ Aristot. *Poet.* 53a8–10

Like any myth, Salome thus takes multiple and changing forms in cinema (as in other art forms), shaped by the “artistic and social ideology of the period in which she was depicted”³⁴ and further demonstrating the role of cinema as a “social and cultural barometer”³⁵. In common with many Greek myths and in line with a documented life cycle in cinema³⁶, the repetitions of Salome’s tragedy also unsurprisingly progressively turned the myth into a parody. To be true, Salome did not wait cinema to become the subject of a parody, as already illustrated by Jules Laforgue’s short story (*Salomé*, 1887). Wilde’s play itself includes many features of a “bourgeois comedy”³⁷, matching Susan Sontag’s definition of “camp” as “playful” and “anti-serious”, possibly the antithesis of tragedy³⁸. On account of its art nouveau references as well as its “gay reputation”³⁹, Nazimova’s movie has itself been similarly defined as “camp”⁴⁰. The parody has however become perhaps only fully explicit since the 1970s with Bene, Russell and Ming-Liang. Bene uses colours, rapid and psychedelic flashes and introduces in the story the figure of Jesus as a vampire who ends up crucifying himself: “the editing, syncopated since the beginning of the film, becomes even faster as the promise of Salome’s dance approaches. The viewer’s eyes suffer from this succession of flickering images, but not as much as the characters whose heads are literally severed by close-ups and incessant cuts”⁴¹.

Russell’s movie, constructed as a play within the play featuring Wilde and his lover Bosie who attend a clandestine representation of *Salome* in a London brothel, is equally parodic⁴². It for includes a Salome who walks around in high heels, a Monthy Pythonesque scene where clumsy soldiers struggle to enter and exit a door while carrying Narraboth’s corpse, or a Herod who falls on a banana skin and dances with topless dancers. The satirical intent is wholly assumed by Wilde’s character in the movie, who states at the end that he was “delighted to find that [he] had written yet another comedy”.

³⁴ Neginsky, 2013, p.67

³⁵ Delage, 2010, p.323

³⁶ Paul, 2013, p.285

³⁷ Pasquier, 2018, p.16

³⁸ Sontag, 2018, pp.25–26; Rowden, 2016, p.vi.

³⁹ White, 2002, p.68

⁴⁰ Fischer, 2017, p.67

⁴¹ Grünberg, 2016, p.173

⁴² Kühnel, 2013, p.174

Behind the parody, Bene and Russell's androgynous Salomes actually take the spectators back not only to Wilde but to the Greek roots of tragedy: in Russell's version, at the end of the "Seven Veils" dance, the naked female Salome (briefly and in a flash) hence becomes a male body, a scene which has in fact been analysed as a (deliberate or not) reference to Plato's *Symposium* and tend to equate Salome with a "mythological figure of ancient times"⁴³.

Besides the parody, the myth of Salome has been the object of intertextuality, most notably in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, where (the faded) Norma Desmond hopes to revive her career by convincing the king of toga film Cecil B. de Mille to direct her in the role of Salome. As noted by Gemünden, the character of Norma Desmond might have been inspired by Nazimova, and the script of her Salome, if she had managed to complete the project, "would most likely not have been that different from de Mille's *Samson and Dalilah*"⁴⁴. A more complex and multi-layered intertextuality applies to *Visage (Face)*, the 2009 arthouse Sino-French movie from the Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-Liang. In this work, produced by and mostly shot in Paris' Le Louvre museum, a (fictional) Chinese film-maker prepares a film about Salome with French actors. Wilde's play had an important literary legacy and reception in China at the beginning of the twentieth century⁴⁵ but Ming-Liang "globalises" the myth, for example when Salome / Laetitia Casta dances and lip-synchs on both traditional Chinese songs ("You are so pretty...How can I not love you?", state the lyrics⁴⁶) and European pop standards (the Spanish hit *Historia de un amor*). Like Bene and Russell, Ming-Liang uses parody, for instance when Salome figuratively "beheads" the male character by pouring on him a giant can of tomato sauce and, in the making-of, the Taiwanese director specifically refers to his

⁴³ Grünberg, 2016, pp.183–184

⁴⁴ Gemünden, 2008, pp.84,89

⁴⁵ Jiang, 2011; Wong, 2002

⁴⁶ Bloom, 2011, pp.116, 117

movie as a “sex comedy”⁴⁷. *Visage* exploits the Salome myth to reflect on European cultural *imaginaire* as a whole⁴⁸, when it gives prominence to Vinci’s *St John the Baptist* (one of Le Louvre’s most popular masterpieces) or when Salome’s dress in the “beheading” scene evokes Pasolini’s *Medea* (presumably not a coincidence, as Pasolini is also explicitly quoted in one of the movie’s other scenes⁴⁹). The film thus provides the spectator with an Eastern gaze on an essentially Western myth and sends Salome back to her roots as a European and Greek tragedy. This return to the “classics” is actually even more evident in Al Pacino’s documentary on Salome, in which the American actor-turned-director tells the story of his “obsession” with Salome and Oscar Wilde. Even if most of the movie is effectively about Wilde, references to the antique still abound and include a scene filmed in California’s desert, meant to evoke the “real characters” who “existed thousands of years ago”, and images of “where the play takes place”(actually a picture of Masada instead of the Machaerus fortress).

A study of Salome in film has then something to say about her as an ancient and classical tragic myth, but also about cinema itself. Film representations of Salome, even if they have undoubtedly not generated masterpieces such as *Ben Hur*, *Spartacus* or *Medea* and suffer from the comparison with Wilde and Strauss’s works, probably deserve more attention in their specificities and in the silver screen’s unique ability to represent and reconcile the Dionysian and Apollonian natures of Salome.

More than literature or painting, cinema intrinsically allows a concrete representation of its characters⁵⁰ including of course the Herodian princess. When filmed, Wilde’s play becomes enriched by symbolism (Nazimova), parody (Bene), a play within a play (Russell) or a documentary and discussion as to the difficulty of staging (Al Pacino) or dancing it (Saura). The spectator’s experience is

⁴⁷ Ming-Liang, 2011

⁴⁸ Cheval, 2018

⁴⁹ Bloom, 2011, p.108

⁵⁰ Delage, 2012, p.336

enhanced by the camera effects, arguably essential to a myth about the power of gaze, where, to quote and paraphrase Norma Desmond's famous final lines in *Sunset Boulevard*, Salome should always be "ready for her close-up". A forthcoming "4D" cinema might even soon allow directors to fulfil Wilde's dream of staging his play as a sensory experience, "with bottles of perfume that would be opened to release scents evoking the emotions of the moment"⁵¹.

Similarly, Friedrich's filmed version of Strauss's opera is more effective than in the opera house and concert hall. The camera close-ups make the tragedy visible to the spectator and open a direct window into Salome's soul⁵², for instance through the focus on her hands when she kisses John's head or the fact that she sings her last notes eyes raised towards the sky. Lastly, cinema equally magnifies Salome's dance and grants the spectator access to a range of details virtually invisible and unnoticeable on a theatre stage⁵³: Saura for example characteristically often chooses to focus his camera on the dancers' faces instead of on their feet.

What is more, because the visual nature of cinema requires the (re)creation of a universe, the representations and interpretations of Salome at the cinema are also illustrative of the two-way dynamics of the act of reception of classical myths⁵⁴ and I therefore now turn to analyse what the Salomés of the cinema tell us about both our past as well as our present.

The historical background for the story of Salomé is necessarily essentially "reconstructed" rather than "reconstituted"⁵⁵. Given the scant evidence provided by the Bible and Josephus regarding the Herodian princess, it is of course initially tempting to simply follow Hayden White's postmodern approach and conclude that there is anyway no such thing as a historical truth that could be

⁵¹ Denisoff, 2007, p.41

⁵² Günzel, 2007, pp.1187, 1195 and 1209

⁵³ Uffreduzzi, 2011, p.7; Günzel, 2007, p.1600

⁵⁴ Paul, 2011, p.307

⁵⁵ Delage and Guigneno, 2018, p.14

followed. Salome is no exception to the rule affecting cinema adaptations of antiquity and mythology and “it is therefore difficult not to say impossible, to maintain that certain accounts of a myth are the correct ones and that others are false”⁵⁶. If Salome is a myth, the spectator is legitimately free to accept and enjoy Dieterle’s view of a Salome that survives and becomes a Christian convert, in many ways a vision just as “historically” valid (or, as a matter of fact, invalid) than Wilde’s or Strauss’s and their cinematic followers’ Dionysian visions of a Salomé punished for her “crime”: after all, the historical Salome survived and, far after the beheading of John that made her so notorious, her image appears on the coinage of the kingdom of Armenia Minor, bequeathed to her husband Aristobulus by Nero in 54 AD⁵⁷. In a different context, the renowned historian George Duby, when working on the project of a film documentary on the medieval battle of Bouvines, gave up the project after acknowledging the impossibility for cinema as a medium to provide a faithful reconstitution of the past⁵⁸ and the same problems would undoubtedly tend to discourage any cinematic attempt at a historically-informed Salome “biopic”.

For all this and conversely, the classicist Robin Lane Fox acknowledged that working as a consultant on Oliver Stone’s movie *Alexander* had provided him with new insights about the Macedonian ruler⁵⁹. A study of the Jesus film genre (in which Salomé often plays a role) in fact considers them as a new and legitimate avenue for biblical interpretation, “an appropriation of the Gospel, with a view to stimulating our imagination, asking fresh questions and finding new answers when we do our exegesis of the text”⁶⁰. Following those approaches, the (past or future) movies about Salomé can and could provide us with several interesting research hypotheses and questions as to, among others, what happened to the real Salome after John the Baptist’s beheading, the role and influence of women in ancient Jewish culture and in the Herodian dynasty, the relations between Jews and

⁵⁶ Winkler, 2009, p.16

⁵⁷ Schwentzel, 2013, p.170; Reinach, 1914

⁵⁸ Duby, 1984

⁵⁹ Paul, 2011, p.307

⁶⁰ Nguyen, 2010, p.189

Romans, the emergence of Christianity and, of course, the historiographical debates about the reliability of the two (controversial) sources regarding Salome, Josephus and the Bible.

Most evidently and obviously though, the movies about Salome and the evolution of her portrayal tell us a lot of about our modern society, for instance when it comes to the two hotly debated questions of feminism and Orientalism.

The Salome myth is a story of gaze and desire but, surprisingly, does not appear to have received any significant attention from feminist film theorists, despite the seeming potential relevance of Laura Mulvey's seminal psychoanalytic discussions of male castration anxiety and her hypothesis that, in cinema, "to allay the threat of castration on the level of the narrative, the female character has to be found guilty, ...her 'guilt' ...sealed by either punishment or salvation"⁶¹. Salome has in fact never been seriously studied by film scholars as a feminist figure, possibly because the perceived insignificance of her cinema representations (or their subordinations to Wilde and Strauss's representations). Yet I would suggest that this is perhaps also because Salome on the silver screen (whenever her Dionysian side prevails) is paradoxically almost too explicitly "feminist". Salome does not correspond to the stereotype of the powerless women, even when she dies and is filmed as a tragic heroine by Saura (incidentally also the director of a movie about Carmen, another "operatic" figure who dies a "free" woman). In her modern cinematic representations, Salome, the symbol of male voyeurism for some, is often a story of female desire, which targets and appeals to those female audiences which Mulvey's approach has actually often been accused of ignoring⁶². Nazimova's movie has for instance only been relatively recently rediscovered by feminist scholars, as one of the first films directed by a woman (it is now widely acknowledged that Nazimova's husband Bryant was only formally credited as a director⁶³) as well as an early homoerotic or "queer" movie. Similarly, Saura's vision for instance clearly conceives and recreates a Salome involved in a tragic war of the sexes and flamenco sets the

⁶¹ Smelik, 1998, p.11; Mulvey, 1989

⁶² Thornham, 1997, p.44

⁶³ Dierkes-Thrun, 2011, p.3022

scene for a violent confrontation between man and woman⁶⁴. He also changes in the process the way the perception of male characters and of Herod. Most movies tend to portray Herod as effeminate and sexually ambiguous, arguably similar to the traditional representation of the villains in Hollywood blockbusters such as Commodus in *Gladiator* or Xerxes in *300*⁶⁵. In contrast, next to his feminist Salome, Saura deliberately wants to show the “virile potential” of Herod⁶⁶. His assertive Herod⁶⁷ first appears in a wheelchair, perhaps “crippled” by his wife and stepdaughter, but quickly raises from it to engage in dancing battles with both women.

Similarly, the Oriental side of the Jewish princess has received only marginally more attention. Flaubert’s *Salamambo* features prominently in Said’s definition and study of Orientalism⁶⁸ but there is no mention of Salome, despite the fact that Flaubert is of course also the writer of *Hérodias* and Wilde’s description of Salome as “Salamambo’s mystical sister”⁶⁹. The princess of Judea thus probably deserves more recognition as a “founding fable of Orientalism”⁷⁰ and her cinematic representations constitute an integral part of this. The first cinema Salome, Theda Bara, had chosen her stage name as an anagram of “Arab death” and also incarnated such staple figures of Orientalism such as Cleopatra⁷¹. Nazimova equally played on her exotic and “orientalised persona”⁷². Hayworth, while not corresponding to the physical stereotype of the Oriental, still evolves in an Oriental environment and within an “Oriental” court: Dieterle’s stage decors were duly reused for another toga movie made the same year by Columbia pictures, William Castle’s *Serpent of the Nile: the Loves of Cleopatra*⁷³. Similarly, Friedrich’s Salome appears surrounded by black “slaves” in an environment

⁶⁴ Kühnel, 2013, p.182; Günzel, 2007, p.1532

⁶⁵ Courcoux, 2009, p.33

⁶⁶ Medrano 2002

⁶⁷ Günzel, 2007, p.1539

⁶⁸ Said, 2003, p.181

⁶⁹ Schiffer, 2009, p.242

⁷⁰ Garelick, 2007, p.87

⁷¹ Kobel, 2007, p.152; Wyke, 1997, p.86

⁷² White, 2002, p.67

⁷³ Winkler, 2009, p.280

described by one reviewer as “a caricature of Western orientalism, a tableau similar to Jean-Léon Gérôme’s detailed and colourful representations of the Arab world”⁷⁴. Black servants or executioners indeed make recurring appearances in Salome films, from Nazimova to Russell.

While cinema directors then emphasize the Oriental aspects of the myth, the Jewishness of Salome however appears strikingly absent from most of her cinematic representations and remains largely “veiled”⁷⁵. In cinema, while Salome is often “Oriental”, she is never the “errant Jewess” of her medieval representations or Heine’s *Atta Troll*⁷⁶. Strauss considered Salome a *Judenoper* (and there is an ongoing debate as to the antisemitism or not of its music)⁷⁷ but, on the silver screen, Salome appears only fortuitously Jewish, because of the conventions of the “Biblical” movie (such as in Dieterle) or the legacy of Wilde and Strauss (even in the form of a parody, for instance for Russell, where “Herod” engages in a dance with “Jews” in traditional Hassidic attire).

To conclude and come back to *Sunset Boulevard*, when Norma Desmond mentions the character of Salome, no explanation is necessary and the audience of the 1950s presumably did not require further contextual details about the historical Salome. In sharp contrast, Al Pacino starts his film with a historical reminder, presumably because of the need to introduce the character to a modern audience for whom Salome is not such a familiar figure anymore (in his words, “it shows it’s biblical, people don’t get it otherwise”)⁷⁸. The Salomania of the turn of end of the nineteenth / beginning of the twentieth century is therefore clearly over⁷⁹. When it survives, Salome’s myth now appears at

⁷⁴ Høgåsen-Hallesby, 2016, p.139

⁷⁵ White, 2002.

⁷⁶ Dottin-Orsini, 1996, p.174; Bochet, 2007, p.36

⁷⁷ Clark, 2016, p.157

⁷⁸ Grobel, 2013, p.313

⁷⁹ Claudel, 2013, p.193

first sight disconnected from any ideological underpinning and solely linked to the beauty of Strauss's music⁸⁰ or the popularity of Wilde, as shown by Al Pacino's film, which is to a large extent more about Wilde than about Salome. This is also arguably evidenced by the sheer but ultimately decontextualised (because "globalised"?) beauty of one of the most recent Salomes, the top model Laetitia Casta (in Ming-Liang's movie).

For all this, the multiple and continuing references to Salome in films suggest that the life cycle of the myth might not be over yet. In the "Me Too" era, feminist interpretations of the myth are bound to (re)appear in films, as is already the case for Strauss's opera (for example in Jacobs' 2018 production at the English National Opera⁸¹). Perhaps more than ever, and as Wilde put it, "Salome is just like a mirror reflecting those who look into it"⁸², which is tentatively what makes a movie about Salome so difficult to make and succeed, despite the unique potentialities of cinema explored in this essay.

The novelist François Weyergans imagines the story of a film director who dreams to make a movie about Salome but is ultimately compelled to concede that 'his eye is unable to film Salome'⁸³. The real story of Salome on the silver screen indeed largely appears to be a tale of critical and commercial challenges and even failures: from Nazimova (who ended up financially ruined by the experience⁸⁴) to the doubts and hesitations vividly expressed by Al Pacino or Saura in their movies (both effectively documentaries and meta-narratives about filming Salome⁸⁵). Even the fictional Norma Desmond will never have her "close-up" as Salome but despite this, and because of her tragic combination of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the princess of Judea nevertheless deserves a place among the great ancient myths and her representation in cinema more interdisciplinary attention from classical reception or film scholars.

⁸⁰ Neginsky, 2013, p.87

⁸¹ Salome, English National Opera 2018

⁸² Rottenberg, 2004, p.121

⁸³ Weyergans, 2005, p.55

⁸⁴ White, 2002, p.72

⁸⁵ Grobel, 2013, p.318

References

Ancient and primary sources

Aristotle, *Poetics*. S. Halliwell (trans.). 1995. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.

The Bible. Revised Standard Version of the Bible. 1952, 2nd edition 1971. Available online at:

<http://www.biblestudytools.com/>.

Flavius Josephus. *The New Complete Works*. W. Whiston (trans.). 1999. Grand Rapids: Kregel.

Nietzsche, F. *Die Geburt der Tragödie (La Naissance de la Tragédie)*. P. Wotling (trans.). 2013. Paris: Le Livre de Poche (1st edition in German: 1872).

Films quoted

Ben Hur (1959) Directed by William Wyler. [DVD]. Los Angeles: Metro Goldwyn Mayer.

Jason and the Argonauts (1963) Directed by Don Chaffey [DVD]. Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures.

Jesus of Nazareth (1977) Directed by Franco Zeffirelli [DVD]. Los Angeles: Paramount.

King of Kings (1961) Directed by Nicholas Ray [DVD]. Los Angeles: Metro Goldwyn Mayer / Samuel Bronston productions.

Medea (1969). Directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini [DVD]. Rome, Paris: Euro International Film, SNC , Groupe M6.

Salome (1918) Directed by J. Gordon Edwards. Now lost.

Salome (1923) Directed by Charles Bryant [DVD]. Los Angeles: Bach Films.

Salome (1953) Directed by William Dieterle [DVD]. Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures and Beckworth corporation.

Salomé (1972) Directed by Carmelo Bene [DVD]. Roma and Prato: Ital Noleggio Cinemagrafico and General Video Recording.

Salome (1974). Directed by Götz Friedrich [DVD]. Munich and Hamburg: Unitel and Deutsche Grammophon.

Salomé (1978) Directed by Pedro Almodovar. Madrid: Manuela Films. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FJW6BbcjFQ> (Accessed: 16 April 2019).

Salomé (2002). Directed by Carlos Saura [DVD]. Madrid: Zebra Producciones and Filmax Home Video.

Salome's Last Dance (1988). Directed by Ken Russell [DVD]. London: Eagle Pictures.

Salome Where she danced (1945) Directed by Charles Lamont. Los Angeles: Universal Pictures.

Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IH_0dK40EAW (Accessed : 17 April 2019).

Sunset Boulevard (1950) Directed by Billy Wilder [DVD]. Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures.

The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965) Directed by George Stevens. [DVD]. Los Angeles: United Artists.

The Robe (1953) Directed by Henry Koster. [DVD]. Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox.

Visage (2009) Directed by Tsai Ming-Liang [DVD]. Paris: JBA Production / Homegreen Films / musée du Louvre / Arte.

Wilde Salomé (2011) Directed by Al Pacino. Los Angeles: Chal Productions. Available at:

<https://vimeo.com/212920949> (Accessed : 17 April 2019).

Other sources

Bloom, M. (2011) 'The intertextuality of Tsai Ming-liang's Sinofrench film, *Face*', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, 5(2), pp.103-121.

Bochet, M. (2007) *Salomé: Du Voilé au Dévoilé. Métamorphoses littéraires et artistiques d'une figure biblique*. Paris: Les éditions du Cerf.

Cheval, O. (2018) 'Les dessous du Louvre: Visage de Tsai Ming-liang comme musée imaginaire de l'Occident', in Jibojki, J. Le Maître, B. , Pernac, N. and Verraes, J. (eds) *Muséoscopies. Fictions du musées au cinéma*. Nanterre: Presses de Paris Nanter

Clark, C. (2016) 'The Dirt on Salome', in Rowden, C. (ed.) *Performing Salome, Revealing Stories*. London and New York: Routledge: pp.150–165.

Claudé, P.A. (2013) *Salomé: Destinées imaginaires d'une figure biblique*. Paris: Ellipses.

Courcoux, C.A. (2009) 'From Here to Antiquity: Mythical Settings and Modern Sufferings in Contemporary Hollywood's Historical Epics', *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, 39(2), pp.29–38.

Delage, C. and Guigneno, V. (2018) *L'historien et le film*. Paris: Gallimard.

Delage, C. (2010) 'L'histoire au cinéma', in Delacroix, C., Dosse, F, Garcia, P. and Offenstadt, N. (eds) *Historiographies: Concepts et Débats*. Paris: Folio: pp.322–330.

Delage, C. (2012) 'Histoire', in de Baeque, A. and Chevallier, P. (eds) *Dictionnaire de la pensée au cinéma*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France: pp.336–338.

Denisoff, D. (2007) 'Decadence and aestheticism', in Marshall, G. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: pp.31–52.

Dierkes-Thrun, P. (2011) *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press (Kindle electronic edition).

Duby, G. (1984) 'L'historien et le Cinéma', *Le Débat*, 30, pp.81–85.

Eschrich. (2011) "'Behold the Man!': Constructing the Masculinity of Jesus of Nazareth in Mainstream American Film, 1961–2004', *Men and Masculinities*, 14(5), pp.520–541.

Fischer, L. (2017) *Cinema by Design: Art Nouveau, Modernism, and Film History*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Garelick, R. K. (2007) *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller's Performance of Modernism*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Gemünden, G. (2008) *A Foreign Affair: Billy Wilder's American Films*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Gilliam, B. (2010) 'Strauss and the sexual body: the erotics of humor, philosophy, and ego-assertion', in Youmans, C. (ed.) *The Cambridge companion to Richard Strauss*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: pp.269–279.

Grobel, L. (2013) *"I want you in my movie": My Acting Debut and Other Misadventures Filming Al Pacino's Wilde Salome*. New York: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Grünberg, T. (2016) 'Outrageous Salome: Grace and Fury in Carmelo Bene's *Salomè* and Ken Russell's *Salome's Last Dance*', in Rowden, C. (ed.) *Performing Salome, Revealing Stories*. London and New York: Routledge: pp.166–183.

Günzel, F. (2007) *"Tanze, Salome, tanze für mich!": Salome in den Medien des 19. bis 21. Jahrhunderts*. Unpublished MA dissertation. University of Siegen (available on Kindle).

Halliwell, S. (1995) 'Introduction', in *Aristotle XXIII (Aristotle's Poetics, Loeb Classical Library)*. Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press: pp.3–26.

Høgåsén-Hallesby. (2016) 'Seven Veils, Seven Rooms, Four Walls and Countless Contexts', in Rowden, C. (ed.) *Performing Salome, Revealing Stories*. London and New York, Routledge: pp.128–149.

Holtmark, E.B. (2001) 'The *Katabasis* Theme in Modern Cinema', in Winkler M.M. (ed.) *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*. Oxford University Press: Oxford: pp.293–682 (Kindle edition).

Jiang, J. (2011) 'Chinese Salomés on the Modern Stage', *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 23 (2), pp.175-209.

- Kobel, P. (2007) *Silent movies, the birth of film and the triumph of movie culture*. New York, Boston, London: Little, Brown and Company.
- Kühnel, J. (2013) 'Salome im Film', in Müller, U., Kühnel, J. and Schmidt, S. (eds) *Richard Strauss Salome: Stoff-Tradition, Text und Musik, Beiträge des Ostersymposiums Salzburg 2011*. Salzburg: Verlag Mueller-Speiser: pp.159–191.
- Medrano, S. (2002), 'Buscando a Salomé', in C. Saura. *Salomé* [DVD]. Madrid: Zebra Producciones and Filmax Home Video.
- Ming-Liang, T. (2011) 'Interview with T. Ming-Liang', in A.Guillot and J.P. Navarre. *Salomé et le dragon: Un documentaire radiophonique de France Culture autour de la fabrication de Visage* [DVD]. Paris: Radio France.
- Mulvey, L. (1989) 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in Mulvey, L. (ed.) *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: Macmillan: pp.14–26 (first published 1975).
- Neginsky, R. (2013) *Salome: The Image of a Woman who never was; Salome: Nymph, Seducer, Destroyer*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Nguyen, H.T. (2010) 'The Quest for the Cinematic Jesus: Scholarly Explorations in Jesus Films', *Currents in Biblical Research*, 8(2), pp.183–206.
- Nikoloutsos, K.P. (2013) *Ancient Greek Women in Film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pasquier, M.C. (2018) 'Introduction' and 'Notes', in Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*. Paris: Folio: pp.7–24 and 132–147.
- Paul, J. (2011) 'Working with Film: Theories and Methodologies', in Hardwick, L. and Stray, C. (eds) *A Companion to Classical Receptions*. Chichester and Oxford: Wiley–Blackwell: pp.303–314.
- Paul, J. (2013) *Film and the Classical Epic Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pidduck, J. (2004) *Contemporary costume film: space, place and the Past*. London: BFI Publishing.

- Reinach, T. (1914) 'Le mari de Salomé et les monnaies de Nicopolis d'Arménie', *Revue des études anciennes*, XVI(2), pp.133–158.
- Ross, I. (2013) *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rottenberg, C. (2004) 'Salome of the Tenements, the American Dream and Class Performativity', *American Studies*, 45(1), pp.65-83.
- Rowden, C. (2016) 'Introduction: Performing Salome, Revealing Stories', in Rowden, C (ed.) *Performing Salome, Revealing Stories*. London and New York, Routledge, pp.1–14.
- Ryan, C.M. (1999) 'Salvaging the Sacred: Female Subjectivity in Pasolini's Medea', *Italica*, 76(2), pp.193-204.
- Said, E.W. (2003) *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books (first edition 1978).
- Salome* by Richard Strauss (2008) Directed by Adrian Jacobs [English National Opera, London, 6 October 2018].
- Saura, C. (2002) 'Interview with C. Saura', in C. Saura. *Salomé* [DVD]. Madrid: Zebra Producciones and Filmax Home Video.
- Saxton, A. (1996) 'Présentation de Salomé', *Équivalences*, 26 (1), pp.21-30.
- Schiffer, D.S. (2009) *Oscar Wilde*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Schwentzel, C.G. (2013) *Juifs et Nabatéens: les Monarchies ethniques du Proche-Orient hellénistique et romain*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.
- Smelick, A. (1998) *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory*. London: Mac Millan Press.
- Sontag, S. (2018) *Notes on 'Camp'*. London: Penguin Books (first published 1966).
- Syrimis, M. (2012) 'Pasolini's Erotic Gaze from "Medea" to "Salò"', *Italica*, 89(4), pp.510-531.

Thornham, S. (1997) *Passionate Detachments: An Introduction to Feminist Film Theory*. London and New York: Arnold.

Tulard, J. (2002) *Guide des films*. Paris: Laffont.

Uffreduzzi, E. (2011) 'Salome, Modern Dance and the Liberation of the Female Body in Early Cinema', *International conference Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinema's Past & Future*. Centre for Research in Media and Cultural Studies, University of Sunderland, UK, 13th-15th April. Available at : https://www.academia.edu/10977174/Salome_Modern_Dance_and_Liberation_of_the_Female_Body_in_Early_Cinema (Accessed: 15 April 2019).

Vincent, M.F. (2011) *Shifting Sands of Identity: Salome and select early twentieth-century interpretations*. Unpublished MA dissertation. Bowling Green State University.

Weyergans, F. (2005) *Salomé*. Paris: Leo Scheer.

White, P. (2002) ' Nazimova's Veils Salome at the Intersection of Film Histories', in Negra, D. and Bean, J. (eds) *A Feminist Reader In Early Cinema*. Durham NC: Duke University Press: pp.60-87.

Winkler, M.M. (2009) *Cinema and Classical Texts: Apollo's New Light*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wong, L. (2002) 'Salomé in Chinese Dress: Guo Moruo's "Three Rebellious Women"', *Journal of Irish Studies*, 17, pp.118-125.

Wyke, M. (1997) *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History*. New York and London: Routledge.